

Building to Fall

By

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Abstract

Building to Fall is an exploration of our experiences that establish ideas of balance, risk, and failure, testing theories about the physical and social world in which we exist. Throughout history we have encountered many failures and follies, many of which we continue to repeat. I explore these repetitious actions and ideas through the construction of ceramic sculptures.

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My childhood was spent taking risks. Whether this meant moving a bike ramp a little further, climbing a tree a little higher, or keeping my eye on the ball, I learned invaluable lessons taking chances. It should have only taken one time to realize how far I could jump my bike, but I have several scars to show that it didn't. I should have learned that climbing on branches thinner than my thumb was a bad idea, but when you are trying to climb higher than your brothers, pride becomes a factor, and often there are too many things of interest around you to know where the ball is. My thesis exhibition, Building to Fall, is an exploration of our experiences that establish ideas of balance, risk, and failure, testing theories about the physical and social world in which we exist.

Throughout my youth my father, my brothers and I would go out to my family's farm nearly every weekend. This homestead upon which my grandfather was raised consisted of a house, and many outbuildings on more than 70 acres. It had been a working farm up until the 1960s. Remnants from the time when this was a working farm were everywhere. My father often made furniture out of reclaimed objects that most would regard as trash. Therefore, I never really saw these remnants from the past as junk but as components to create something functional or useful. When I began making ceramic art in college I immediately went to this imagery from the farm, using trompe l'oeil techniques in my ceramic pieces to give the appearance of old decrepit tools and objects. Although I didn't realize why I was making the objects, it was clear that I saw these farm-found forms in a different way. The pieces I made were not typically just a recreation of the original; most often my only reference was my own memories of the object. In addition, they were also given a traditional function that a ceramic piece would possess such as a teapot, cup, flask, or bowl. I remember seeing old objects on the farm, and envisioning them with one of these new functions; such as seeing the body, spout and handle of a teapot in an old wagon wheel.

After several years of making objects from the farm I began to realize how much waste there was, and is still today. We had recently begun to revive the land into a working hay farm when I started to think about these ideas of reusing, recycling, and reducing our impact on the earth due to our research on integrating sustainability tactics into our farming. I began thinking about how my father would reuse these objects, and also how I was implying their reuse by making functional objects out of their imagery. I started pulling more from the farm, objects that could portray a more powerful idea. I created my first oilcan flask my final semester of undergraduate school when The University of Iowa acquired a new ceramic decal printer. The printer would print full color ceramic pigment on a sheet of decal paper, later to be applied to the work as a final step and firing. This opened up my possibilities of what I could do as far as imagery on the oilcans, and it allowed me to push the content of the work.

I entered graduate school to further enhance the conceptual aspects of my work. I started off by creating a skyscraper form from small oilcans entitled *Consummation of Empire*. This was a big jump for me conceptually; the moment when I began to think about overall forms more than the individual component. I realized I could use individual elements in order to create a more conceptually driven piece. While in my second year I revisited this idea, creating a much larger skyscraper form that was nearly 6 ft. tall entitled *Destruction of Empire*. This piece had the ceramic decals and rust like my previous piece, but I also added elements of clay-ness by using cobalt blue and white imagery inside each individual can, only viewable through small sandblasted areas. The imagery was not only meant to display that the object was clay, but also strengthened the piece's concept. The images were segments of a series of paintings by Thomas Cole entitled *The Course of Empire*.¹ This five-painting series depicted a reoccurring landscape that was changing with

¹ Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire*, 1833-36. Oil on canvas, The New-York Historical Society.

the evolution and rise of a civilization, ultimately destroyed by war and destruction and reclaimed by the land in the final painting. This series of paintings was a reason I became interested in art, and it has always stuck with me as a huge inspiration for my work. The previous two pieces I mentioned take their titles from this series. *Destruction of Empire* was a break through for me; it pushed me to go in a conceptual direction that I had previously been cautious of for many reasons, one of which was failure. This fear of my work failing in one way or another inhibited me from pursuing certain forms and concepts. I needed to take the risks in order to push my work to a place where it was conceptually successful and the idea of failing is what allowed me to do so.

At the beginning of my thesis year I thought about *Destruction of Empire* again, what I could take from it and what could I afford to lose. The many different surfaces and forms created confusion. There was not only blue and white imagery derivative of China, but also American imagery on the cans mixed with images from the aforementioned series of paintings by Thomas Cole². I looked at the individual oilcans as single entities; they were very brick like, in size and in function but I needed to simplify the idea even further in order to make my concepts clear and concise. This is when I started looking at the children's block. The children's block is a form that almost everyone is familiar with in some way or another; and it fit all the criteria for what I wanted out of a form. While using blocks children are testing theories. They are learning that when you stack something too high and it isn't stable it falls, a lesson in both gravity and balance. They are also mimicking things they see and experience in their lives, learning about spatial relationships and functions. A child's encounter with blocks is one of the first times they experience failure first hand; they see the direct consequences of their actions when they make a mistake while building. This

² Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire*, 1833-36. Oil on canvas, The New-York Historical Society.

physical act of failing aids in their cognition of what went wrong and why. Up until this age children are somewhat naïve about failure and the history of the world, concepts I wanted the individual units to possess. These units would be oilcans altered into the form of the children's blocks to achieve shapes like arches, posts, triangles, or cylinders. The space in which the can had been altered was painted in primary colors with latex house paint as a way to exemplify their identities as blocks but not taking away from their oilcan-ness.

For my thesis exhibition, Building to Fall, a large stark white wall that takes its form from Roman or Greek architecture confronts the viewer when entering the gallery entitled *Prophetic Remnants*. The lighting is such that it is more heavily lit than the rest of the space; I wanted this piece to stand out so much so that it creates questions about its purpose. The middle of the wall is crumbled and shards are scattered around it, evidence that this civilization had failed despite its level of sophistication implied by the complex architectural construction. What caused this failure is left unanswered, yet its placement in the gallery presents a choice to the viewer; walk around it without concern of what caused this to fail, or take it in and question if we are making the same mistakes. The reflection of the wall on the black gallery floors helped exemplify this reflection on the cause of its failure.

The next piece in the exhibition, framing the wall, was *Inclination*. For this piece I initially wanted to mimic what a child would do with blocks; build it as high as I could. *Inclination* embodies the idea of a skyscraper in form and concept, a symbol of power rising to the heavens. One important feeling I was aiming to evoke with these taller pieces was tension. The tension felt upon approaching the piece is great; its implied instability is nerve inducing, causing the viewer to cautiously approach for fear of damaging the piece. The title takes its name from its definition; a tendency towards a certain condition, which when paired with the implied instability suggests an impending failure on the horizon if we don't make a change.

Another piece framing the wall in the exhibition is *Precarious Payload*. This piece is reminiscent of a column, with a base and a capitol consisting of four cast-porcelain squirt guns. The column is resting on the triggers of the guns at the base with the barrels pointing upwards, while the guns at the top of the piece are resting on their own triggers, the barrels pointing down. This piece evokes tension in a similar way as *Inclination* in regards to height and its precarious appearance but pushes it further into unease upon the realization that it is resting on four small triggers. This symbolizes a climax, a civilization on the verge of destruction, the weight of the column hypothetically about to engage and fire the guns at any moment. The guns symbolize the rights of the people, rights that were shaped during the formation of the United States of America, meant to maintain order and freedom in our society. The right to bear arms is one of the most widely known of our American rights, and as of late one of the most widely disputed due to many recent shootings and violence. Kansas recently passed laws making it legal to carry a firearm without any sort of a permit, an idea that is personally terrifying to think about. This piece resting on the triggers signifies that these gun laws could have potentially devastating effects which as of now remain unclear, but are seemingly on the cusp of being known.

Hesitation is a piece about half as tall as *Inclination* and *Precarious Payload*. Around the base of the piece resting on the pedestal are a variety of cans of different shapes and colors. This piece is meant to convey, as its title alludes to, a sense of hesitation; a moment in which one might be thinking about the rate at which our society is going, questioning whether to continue. Twenty feet away stands a taller version of this piece, *Inclination*, teetering on the brink of collapse; even closer than *Inclination* is *Prophetic Remnants*, indirect evidence of a failed civilization. It is paused in a moment of reflection upon the past and uncertainty of the future.

There are many different fates that can become of a society, war being a common cause for demise. *Expenditure* is a piece that reflects upon the idea of war, power, and the commodities that were expended in order to protect or advance a civilization or society. This piece is reminiscent of a war memorial, cast-porcelain toy army men stand on its four corners with a larger, all white army man at the top. This piece is much more composed than the rest of the work, which conveys order. The lighting was done in a way that creates a strong visual contrast of the top army man and the gray wall behind it, allowing it to stand out amongst the rest of the piece. The smaller army men are more similarly toned to the rest of the form, blending in while standing guard atop the monument. The pedestals add a sense of monumentality and power to the piece, separating it from the viewer while elevating it off of the ground. The idea of the monument was important; many of our most famous monuments are direct reminders of our failures and follies as a society. These monuments are meant to convey victory, loss, or remembrance for those who were lost, yet just as easily remind us of turmoil and the possible outcomes if we had failed.

There are several facets of my thesis exhibition that I might have changed if I had the opportunity. One aspect was the lighting; if I had no limitations on the exhibition space and lighting I would have used the lighting to inject more conceptual meaning. This could have been achieved by thinking of lighting simultaneously with the creation of the form, allowing a more direct connection between the form and light. Another aspect of the exhibition I would have addressed is the pedestal. Like the lighting, I feel if I would have addressed this from the beginning of the forms they could have had a much stronger connection with the work. Other than those few changes, I felt as though my thesis exhibition was a success in showcasing my research over the past three years.

Coming into this program I had the technical abilities to create visually stimulating work. Throughout my studies I focused on the conceptual aspect of my work and criticized

it heavily in order to grow in this area. Overthinking combined with a fear of failure were common mistakes that led to the realization of simplifying the forms and pushing past my fears. That fear of failure is where the concept for my thesis was created. The idea of creating a body of work that failed kept me from making work that I was uncomfortable with. I made pieces that were technically and aesthetically successful, yet they lacked emotion and concept, something I wanted to improve upon in graduate school. It is important for me to continue this body of work, expanding and progressing what I have already accomplished in my thesis exhibition. Our historical failures as a species have provided fodder for years of new work, and we certainly aren't done yet.



Wagon Wheel Teapot
Earthenware
2012



4 in 1 Flask
Porcelain
2012



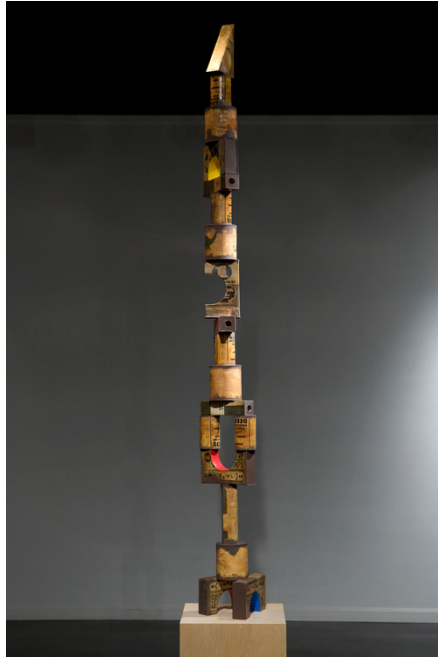
Destruction of Empire
Porcelain
2014



*Thomas Cole: Destruction of Empire
1833-1836*



*Prophetic Remnants
Porcelain
2015*



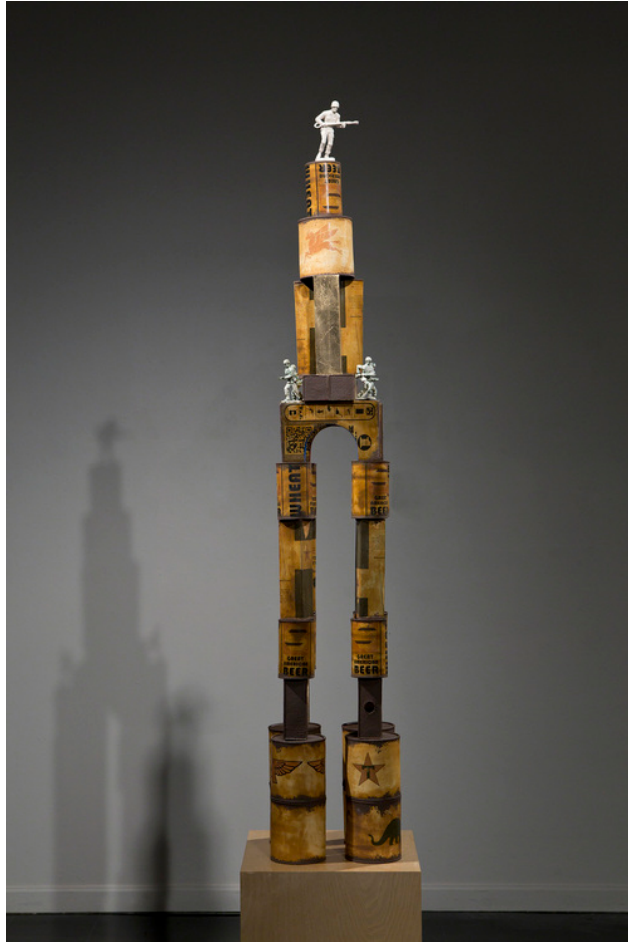
Inclination
Porcelain, Latex Paint, Gold Leaf
 2015



Precarious Payload
Porcelain, Latex Paint, Gold Leaf
 2015



Hesitation
Porcelain, Latex Paint, Gold Leaf
2015



Expenditure
Porcelain, Latex Paint, Gold Leaf
2015

Bibliography

Cole, Thomas. *The Course of Empire*, 1833-1836. Oil on Canvas, The New-York Historical Society.